

School Children Meet the Face Behind Their Food



Jeremy Calvert, a farmer in Cullman County, visits with first graders Mary-Claire Ray and Makena Evans in the cafeteria over a bowl of fresh, ripe strawberries that Calvert supplies to the Cullman City Primary School.

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In 11 North Alabama counties, approximately \$2.2 billion is spent annually on food from sources outside of the state. The Farm Food Collaborative (FFC), a partner of the Farm to School Program, has found a solution to keep the wealth in the local economy. Since the start-up of Huntsville's FFC, over a half million dollars in produce sales are circulating throughout the North Alabama region. The program provides local growers the opportunity to connect with local businesses, such as schools, hospitals, grocery stores and restaurants, in hopes of limiting their need to seek food vendors outside the state.

Jeremy Calvert, a farmer in Cullman County, has benefitted from FCC's program by providing 1,740 pounds of strawberries to the Cullman City Primary School. He said that the opportunity is a win-win for him. He is able to sell his extra produce while encouraging the students to both eat local and gain a better understanding of agriculture. Calvert explained, "Each generation is more removed from the farm and children are unaware of how food is grown. Therefore, the misconceptions of farming practices increases." He hopes through this program, the students will have a higher appreciation of the responsible and sustainable practices used by farmers.



The FFC is so important to Calvert that he went to the cafeteria on a day his strawberries were being served. It was the first time that first graders Mary-Claire Ray (7) and Makena Evans (7) met the farmer that grew their food. The girls' excitement to meet the grower was evident as they giggled and ate the delicious fruit. They were fascinated to see that he wasn't dressed in old western wear. In fact, he looked just like anyone else in the community. Through FFC's efforts, they enjoyed fresh sweet strawberries and gained an appreciation of where their food came from.

Farm Food Collaborative Coordinators Carey Martin and Brooke Adam hope that the children take home a new appreciation for

high quality fruits and vegetable. Adam said, "By giving them (students) these recently picked strawberries, we are imprinting ideas of what strawberries should taste like." This in turn will influence their expectations of what the grocery stores provide.

Since 1999, Alabama has increased its farmers' market numbers from 17 to 168. "Local produce is available throughout the state because of Alabama's ideal climate and rich soils. Communities should utilize the opportunity to buy fresh and local," commented Department of Agriculture and Industries Commissioner John McMillan.

Allowing children, like Mary-Claire and Makena, to enjoy locally-sourced produce helps increase the connection to their food and encourages the next generation to see agriculture in a more positive light. Though there is no doubt that the girls enjoyed the fresh strawberries served in their cafeteria, there was a predicament as to who was going to get to eat the last strawberry remaining on the tray. The look in their eyes said it all. They both clearly wanted it.

The Farm Food Collaborative will continue to enhance the relationship between farmers and businesses in hopes of increasing the fresh produce consumed in the community. "This program helps keep family farms operating and results in a reinvestment in the state," said Martin. As Calvert said, it is truly a win-win for all involved.

For more information on Farm Food Collaborative, visit www.foodbanknorthal.org/programs/ffc/ or for details on the Farm to School Program, contact Andrea Carter at andrea.carter@agi.alabama.gov or at 334-240-7258.